

## Making waves: Can a change in the breakwater bring back surf to Long Beach?

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LONG BEACH >> As you take in the sights and sounds of this typical Southern California beach, you notice something is missing.

Waves. One thing you won't hear in Long Beach is the sound of crashing surf.

The 2.5-mile Long Beach Breakwater built parallel to the shore a mile and half out stops the ocean's natural wave energy, resulting in stiff breezes and placid waters for SoCal's second-biggest city.

"I once had a lady from Great Britain come up to me on the beach and ask me where are the waves? I had to send her to Seal Beach," said Robert Palmer, a proud Long Beach resident and member of the Surfrider Foundation who has been working on the idea of removing the breakwater for the last 17 years.

He's buoyed by a united Long Beach City Council, which has voted to pony up \$2.25 million to do a \$3 million feasibility study on how to get rid of the rock barrier or at least reconfigure it to allow waves and better water circulation.

What started as an unpopular idea from a group of enviro-surfers has become official city policy. The city is waiting for approval of the study from the breakwater owners, the federal Army Corps of Engineers, said Tom Modica, city director of government affairs and strategic initiatives. "We expect to have an agreement by the end of this year and for the study to start the first quarter of 2014," he said.

A thin pencil line

Palmer, a sailor, offers a view the breakwater from Alamitos Bay. "You don't get the appreciation of it from the shoreline. It just looks like a thin pencil line," Palmer said. Originally completed in 1949, the structure helped calm the water for a Navy shipyard. But the Navy moved out in the '70s, and many now say the breakwater has lost its purpose.

The breakwater is built like a pyramid, with the widest part touching the ocean floor more than 50 feet deep. The rocks stick up only a few feet above the water but do an excellent job of stopping the waves. On the bay side, brown pelicans make it their home, their droppings changing the color of the earth-tone rocks quarried from Catalina Island.

The breakwater interrupts the long current, causing an unnatural water action. The breakwater stretches parallel to the Long Beach beaches and is not attached to shore. Jetties are different because they extend perpendicular from the shore, creating channels. But while jetties calm waves, they don't eliminate them.

The city-approved study would likely give proponents ammunition to continue their fight. For the first time, they may have real data on what a reconfiguration would do to the surf and the long shore current.

A recent survey said the No. 1 reason people come to Southern California is the beach. That means waves, if only to watch from the shore or ride belly-down on a boogie board.

“That is the mystique I bought into when I moved from Illinois. I had this vision of surf and beaches and summer all year round. That is what most people who come here think — it is their fantasy of California,” Palmer said. “We are being denied the California Dream.”

## Change within reason

Long Beach beaches are mostly empty in summer. The crowds go to Seal Beach, Huntington Beach, Newport Beach and north to Santa Monica. The lack of waves is one reason. The poor water quality is the other. Many believe a return of waves and the long shore current will clean out the stagnant water that pollutes Long Beach and bring back the people.

“Long Beach will have more wave activity, we will be able to restore the ecosystem as well as improve the quality of the water,” explained Vice Mayor Robert Garcia.

Garcia, like most in this town, couch their support with qualifying phrases. “We have to look at (breakwater) reconfiguration as an option. Our decision needs to be made on science and engineering,” he said. “I support a federal study which will tell us once and for all what we can and cannot do.”

What no one wants is to damage expensive homes on a spit of land known as the Peninsula. Folks who live here have formed the Peninsula Beach Preservation Group to make sure that doesn’t happen.

Members of the group say the study should not be a foregone conclusion for reconfiguration.

“Survey after survey done here on the Peninsula find a huge majority afraid that reconfiguration or removal would put our homes in danger,” said Tony Gentile, a group member and Peninsula resident.

Erosion of the beach is a concern today, and that’s with the protective breakwater calming the sea, he said.

Former Peninsula Beach group resident and engineer Phil Osterlind said many in the group feel the city should leave the breakwater alone. “Our view is the breakwater as it stands now already serves Long Beach well. It protects our coast, it provides recreation, it satisfies our harbor requirements and has its own habitat and does provide clean water.”

Reports of water quality off Long Beach beaches have traditionally been poor. However, the ocean waters have shown improvement.

In 2007, only 12 percent of the local beaches received an A or B grade from Heal The Bay, the Santa Monica-based environmental group that reports on beach cleanliness. Much of the pollution comes from urban runoff from the Los Angeles River, which empties into Long Beach.

In the summer of 2012, 77 percent of the beaches received an A or B, Modica said, and last winter, 100 percent received A grades. He said much of that success is getting upstream communities to capture trash before it reaches the L.A. River and the San Gabriel River, which empties into Seal Beach.

Osterlind also is not so sure reconfiguration will help restore waves.

“A lot of that is nostalgia,” he said. “I don’t think it is 100 percent sure that removal of the breakwater

would deliver those waves.”

## Riding the wave

Despite detractors, the city is enthusiastic about getting a study done. If the Army Corps agreed to pay for the remaining \$750,000, Long Beach would have options for reconfiguration by 2017 or earlier, Modica said.

One thing Garcia and others would like to see is increased economic activity.

One study found Long Beach loses \$52 million a year because it doesn't have waves. Beach-front property values in Long Beach are much lower than those in Redondo Beach, Manhattan Beach and Newport Beach.

“There is no question it (reconfiguration) would be an economic boon for the entire city,” said Garcia, who is running for mayor. “You would see more businesses move in, more people at local restaurants and property values would increase.”

The City Council has shifted 180 degrees toward reconfiguration in the last 20 years.

“In 2001, this issue was brought forward by one council member. That motion couldn't get a second,” Modica said. “A lot has changed from the early '90s to 2005 when the city started to move forward with this idea.”

No other beach city that Modica knows of — and he's been involved in this for nearly 10 years — has attempted to study something on this scale.

If the feasibility study came back positive, estimates for removing the rock breakwater range in cost from \$10 million to \$300 million. U.S. law requires the Army Corps to pay 65 percent, and locals to pay the difference, he said.

When Palmer's sailboat, the Windslow, edged to the farthest point of the breakwater, a brown pelican followed the off-white pleasure boat along the port side.

Later, two sea lions popped their whiskered heads above the ocean water on the south side of the breakwater, as if joining the show.

The water was still. Absolutely no waves in sight. The Long Beach skyline shimmered in the rippling ocean.

Palmer cut the engine.

“As you can see, it is a dead sea. Like Lake Michigan. No, even Lake Michigan has some waves,” he said. “It happens to be very un-California-like.”